Childhood Souvenirs

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/74407501.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
Gen

Fandom:
The Pitt (TV)

Relationships:
Michael "Robby" Robinavitch & Dennis Whitaker, Cassie McKay & Dennis Whitaker, Trinity Santos & Dennis Whitaker

Characters:
Dennis Whitaker, Cassie McKay, Michael "Robby" Robinavitch, Trinity Santos, Frank Langdon, Princess (The Pitt)

Additional Tags:
Dennis Whitaker-centric, Implied/Referenced Self-Harm, Angst, Trinity Santos and Dennis Whitaker are Roommates, Confessions, of a sort, POV Dennis Whitaker, Character Study, Projection thinly disguised as a character study, Dennis Whitaker Needs a Hug, Recovery, Confrontations, difficult conversations, Dennis is hurting (quietly), Robby is a ball of anxiety, McKay has a working head on her shoulders

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2025-11-18 Words: 2,508 Chapters: 1/1

Childhood Souvenirs

by Night_Fics

Summary

> “Is there something you want to ask me?” He blurted out, harsher than he intended. Robby’s eyes snapped up to meet his, his eyebrows raised in surprise. He half-chuckled, taken somewhat aback by Dennis’s outburst.
>
> “Like what?”
>
> “You keep staring at my scars. Do you have a question?”

Dennis Whitaker does not cover up his old self harm scars. It took Robby long enough to notice.

Notes

This work contains non-graphic discussion of self-harm. Please read at your own precaution

Title is from Souvenirs by John Prine

See the end of the work for more notes

Dennis was surprised that more people had not noticed sooner. He made little effort to cover up the self harm scars that littered his left forearm. Though they were fully healed and significantly faded, they were still visible. Over the years, Dennis had adapted to certain postures that concealed the most obvious areas- crossing his arms, rotating his wrist inward, clasping his hands behind his back, gesturing with his right arm only- anything to direct people's gazes elsewhere. As far as he could tell, it largely worked. But perhaps it was cocky to think that people truly didn't notice. Most of the time, they were probably polite enough not to ask. Dennis got enough off-comments and questions to know that his only true savior was other people's grace.

And for this, he was grateful. No one he worked with had been rude enough to say anything. They were professionals first, and most knew exactly what the lines of pale, thin, parallel scarring on his forearms indicated. People stared, of course. They would wait for him to look away, thinking they were being subtle, but he could always tell. He could always follow their gaze with his own. Langdon was probably the worst offender, next to Princess. One time he had caught Abbot looking, an unreadable expression on his face before his eyes flicked away and he returned to delivering the brief he was giving.

In truth Dennis did not mind the staring- provided it was within reason. He knew that people were bound to notice, and that it took a second or two for them to process what exactly they were looking at. He knew that for many people, he was the only person in their life who wore such scars so openly. Curiosities were understandable, up to a point. Gratuitous and unsubtle looks were less sympathetic. They made him feel like a culture under a microscope, triggered his shame and spiked his anxiety. Dennis knew that they saw his scars only in the moment they were created- the years that it took for them to heal erased in seconds. He would squirm, cross his arms, pull down his sleeves. The fear was always that a look would be followed up with a question.

Though none of his co-workers had said anything, many patients had. In part it was a numbers business- everyday he was treating dozens

and dozens of patients. Statistically speaking, he was much more likely to get a comment from them than one from the handful of people he regularly worked with. Though he had gotten used to it as a semi-normal occurrence over four years of med school, it was always an uncomfortable encounter. Dennis never liked thinking too much about it, never mind talking about it with a random stranger. But over the years he had perfected his response.

Questions (which they mostly were) were met with a perfectly professional assurance, ‘Nothing for you to worry about. Any other concerns while I'm here?’ Nine times out of ten, this worked well enough to shut down any further discussion. On the off chance that it didn’t, Dennis usually told the truth. He had learned many times over that this was actually easier to do than spinning some insufficient lie that nobody was buying anyways.

Today was one of those days. The patient was an older woman, the most likely demographic next to kids to ask about his arm. They were hardly ever malicious in intent, merely curious or trying to strike up a conversation.

“What happened here?” she asked, holding his hand and rotating his wrist upwards as he tried to palpate her stomach. Dennis could tell by her tone she was curious, mildly concerned, and mostly looking for a conversation. Still his heart rate instantly picked up. Robby and McKay were right behind him, supervising the case.

“Nothing for you to worry about ma’am. Any other worries today?” He asked as he withdrew his hands. He heard how tight his voice was, how it had shifted up an octave.

“Im quite alright dear, but what happened to you?” Had this been any other exam, Dennis could have talked his way out of it. Most likely he would have just told her that a long time ago, he did this to himself. But with McKay and Robby there he froze for a moment, his heart in his throat, shame burning at his cheeks. In the split second he was

silent, his mouth partially open and searching for the words, McKay moved to intervene.

“Im not too concerned either Mrs. Turse but just to be sure we are going to run some tests…” Mrs. Turse accepted the deflection this time and let McKay take her attention. Dennis took the opportunity to avoid Robby’s gaze and and jot some notes down on Mrs. Turse’s chart. "We’ll be back when we have the labs. A nurse will be with you shortly to take some blood,” McKay finished.

As they walked out, Dennis gave a polite nod and smile to Mrs. Turse, but found her gaze right where it had left off. He tucked his arm behind his back and followed McKay quickly away.

“Thanks,” he mumbled once they were a safe distance away and, to his relief, Robby had been pulled away to another more urgent case.

“Don't mention it,” McKay said, waving him away and already pulling up a chart for another patient. She was also on the street team, and over the three months they had worked together Dennis had grown to trust her. It was a somewhat baseless trust, given that they never talked much about their personal lives at all. But watching her handle patients, Dennis knew that he could relax around her. She and Santos were probably the only two people he trusted not to judge him in the slightest.

Robby however was a different story. Evidently, today had been the first time he had noticed Dennis’s scars. After their unfortunate encounter with Mrs. Turse, he caught Robby staring. And staring again. And again. Practically every time he had to talk to him, Robby spared a glance at Dennis’s arm, eyes scanning the raised tissue.

At first Dennis had been patient as usual. He cut him some slack- Robby was older, maybe he was less sensitive to these things. But as

the day wore on and Robby's gaze did not falter, Dennis was growing increasingly uncomfortable and frustrated. Robby was a doctor for christ's sake. He should know how to avert his eyes.

In a spare moment he managed to stop by his locker and grab a zip-up to cover his arms. The rest of the shift blurred by, patients and procedures pulling him away from his irritation. Thankfully, there were much more pressing matters at hand.

It wasn't until he was packing up to go home, shoving his sweater back into his locker, when he caught Robby staring again. Any discomfort he usually felt when someone looked so blatantly seemed to disappear instantly. Instead, anger at Robby's audacity flared in his chest.

"Is there something you want to ask me?" He blurted out, harsher than he intended. Robby's eyes snapped up to meet his, his eyebrows raised in surprise. He half-chuckled, taken somewhat aback by Dennis's outburst.

"Like what?"

"You keep staring at my scars. Do you have a question?"

Robby's eyes widened even further than they already were as he realized what Dennis had meant, realized that he had been caught in the act. A beet red color began to rise in his cheeks as he flushed in embarrassment and fixed his gaze to the floor.

"Sorry," he said, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "I didn't mean to stare."

“Well you have been. Practically the whole day,” he continued, still frustrated. Dennis had heard these words before.

“I’m sorry. Really. If I made you uncomfortable, my apologies.”

Robby spared a side-long glance at Dennis, gauging his reaction to his apology. He looked so mortified Dennis could not help but soften a bit.

“It's alright. Thanks for apologizing.” Robby nodded and busied himself with packing up the rest of his stuff, his eyes glued to the task.

Dennis could see embarrassment and guilt was still plastered across his face. A small tug of guilt of his own pulled at his stomach. He had not intended to humiliate Robby. He was actually not sure what he had hoped to accomplish with his confrontation, aside from stopping the staring. Actually, he was not even sure this had been the exact motive. It felt more like he had displaced his anger and pinned it on Robby instead.

He turned back to his attending, maybe to apologize, but Robby spoke first, a box of beer now tucked under his arm.

“My treat tonight. See you there?”

Dennis managed a curt nod before Robby was fleeing down the hallway. He watched him round the corner, his bag bumping against his hip. Dennis tapped his head against the cool metal lockers and softly cursed himself. He gathered up the remainder of his belongings and followed in Robby’s wake.

Spirits were light on the park benches. The shift had been no less busy than usual, but all had gone smoothly. Not a single person had died that day, not that anyone was going to jinx it by bringing that up. It went unsaid as they joked and popped tabs. As Dennis approached, McKay made a point of scooting over and making a space next to her. He sat down and relaxed somewhat as she lightly punched his arm with a “good work today kiddo,” and her other hand passed him a beer.

He shot her a grateful look and bumped her knee with his own. There was more he wanted to say but now was not the time. He turned his head back to the group and let the tides of the conversation wash over and pull him in.

Eventually people wore down, said their goodbyes, and departed. Trinity locked eyes with him and shot him a look that said *ready to go?* He nodded. She stood up and slipped her hands into her pockets, then made a pained expression and groaned.

“I left my car keys inside. Can you give me a second?” she asked, addressing Dennis.

“Why don't you just bring the car round?” he offered before realizing exactly what he had done.

Trinity nodded before turning back to the hospital, leaving Robby and Dennis alone together. Everyone else had gone home. The tension that had exploded by the lockers crept back in as they both avoided each other’s gaze, the silence growing increasingly awkward. An apology Dennis had been formulating earlier sat on the tip of his tongue, and the buzz from the beer pushed it out.

“Im sorry about earlier. I kinda blew up on you,” he said. Robby turned to look at him, somewhat surprised by his words, but not stunned.

“No, not at all. You were right. My behavior was not polite or appropriate. *I’m* the one that's sorry,” he rebutted.

“That may be true but-” Dennis paused, struggling with the words. He may have started the topic but he was struggling to continue it.

“But what?” Robby prompted.

“But I was frustrated with more than just you,” Dennis said after a beat. Robby was silent, mulling over his words. “That didn’t- doesn’t- give me the right to take it all out on you.”

His words hung in the air. They lapsed into silence again, the only sound the occasional passing of cars on the road behind the park. Dennis spared a glance at Robby, who was rubbing his hands together, an unreadable expression on his face.

“I did have a question,” Robby said after a long pause.

“Shoot,” Dennis replied. Might as well get it over with now.

“Are you alright?”

If they had been at the lockers, he probably would have delivered a curt and cutting response about how he was more than alright and how he did not expect Robby to start treating him like he was fragile for no reason. But his nerves had cooled and a beer was sitting warm in his empty stomach, softening his edges. Dennis paused a beat too long before finally saying.

“Im alright.” He could feel Robby staring at him, scanning his face. He kept his gaze forward.

“You don't cut yourself any more?”

Ah. The million dollar question. The obvious, and only viable answer, was no. No, he does not cut himself. No, he does not have thought of harming himself or others. Yes, he is clean. Dennis wishes it was as simple as that. He would like to claim that self harm was a figment of some distant past. A dumb mistake by a dumb (angry, isolated, scared) teenager. But it simply wasn’t true. Well, some days it was. Maybe most days. He wasn’t really sure. All Dennis knew was that there were off days. But he was recovering. But he was not recovered. God knows if he ever would be, if he ever could be. If anyone ever could be.

“No, I don't.”

He must have hesitated for too long. Or perhaps he was not as opaque as he would have liked to believe. Robby stared at him skeptically, concerned. Dennis prayed Trinity would come soon, but there was no honk of her horn. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Robby move to say something, to ask another question. Whatever it was Dennis knew he would not be able to tolerate it. He spoke the closest thing to the truth that he could manage.

“I learn to live with it, accept it, and find balance when I can.”

Robby shut his mouth. It was maybe unfair for Dennis to throw his own words back at him. But he felt it was unfair for Robby to ask this much of him in the first place. The vulnerability he verged on demanding was downright cruel. At the end of the day, Robby could

not reach him. Dennis would not let him. This exchange was as good as either of them was going to get, and they both knew it.

He looked back at Robby who no longer looked so worried. Instead there was a quiet sadness about his brow that for a second looked like recognition. Dennis wondered how his own face appeared to the other man. They held eye contact for two beats longer than was comfortable when a car horn cut shattered the moment. Dennis was the first to break his gaze. He mumbled out a ‘seeyoutomorrow’ as he stood up from his seat. He did not stop to notice if Robby made an attempt to speak, or an aborted move to stop him. He grabbed his bag and, ducking his head, walked briskly past the other man towards the street.

The evening March air was chilly and bit his cheeks as he approached Trinity’s car. He was glad to have his jacket on.

End Notes

Projection? In my Pitt Fic? Its more likely than you think. I needed to get something like this off my chest and Dennis was looking like a perfect vessel. Pretty happy with the end result, though clearly I'm allergic to unambiguous conclusions (sorry not sorry!). I hope you enjoyed and please don't forget to leave a kudos and comment if that is the case!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!